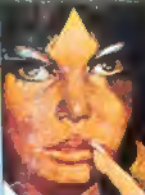


WARREN
MAGAZINE



VAMPI
#53

AUG. 1976

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VAMPIRELLA

SEIZED BY DESPERADO ASSASSINS,
VAMPIRELLA MUST AID THEM...
OR BECOME AN ALIEN TIME BOMB!
"THE HUMAN MARKETPLACE!"





OUR COVER

VAMPIRELLA has joined a band of slave traders as a slave! No doubt our voluptuous heroine will bring a high price as would this phenomenal painting by Enrich!

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VAMPIRELLA®

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Jackie was a little kid with big ideas. Dragons. Knights. Princes. Rescues. These were his style. But his was all a world of daydreams. Until the day Jackie rescued the incredible king of the Leprechauns!

VAMPIRELLA

IT IS A DRY, SUFFOCATING **HEAT** THAT BLANKETS THE **MEXICAN BORDER**, MAKING DRIVING **DIFFICULT** AND COMFORT **IMPOSSIBLE**. AN **OPPRESSIVE** HEAT THAT **DEHYDRATES** THE SKIN AND TURNS FLESH TO **LEATHER**.

PENDRAGON SMILES AS THEY APPROACH THE **U.S. CUSTOMS CHECKPOINT**. TO HIM, IT IS A SIGN THAT THEY ARE ALMOST **HOME**, A WELCOME REASSURANCE THAT **RELIEF** IS FORTH-COMING.



VAMPIRELLA DOES **NOT** SMILE. **APPREHENSION** TIGHTENS THE MUSCLES OF HER STOMACH, FOR SHE KNOWS SHE MUST AGAIN PRESENT HER **FORGED PASSPORT** TO THE SCRUTINY OF A **CUSTOMS INSPECTOR**. HER LUCK HAS BEEN **GOOD** SO FAR...

...BUT GOOD LUCK IS AN ELUSIVE THING THAT HAS A WAY OF **DESERTING** ONE AT MOST INOPPORTUNE TIMES!

THE Human Market Place

THEY STOP, SPENDING LONG ENDLESS **MINUTES** IN THE TINY SHACK. THE HEAT AND TENSION **BUILD**, CREATING A SURREAL **NIGHTMARE**, A DISTORTED LANDSCAPE UNLEASHED FROM **CALIGARI'S CABINET...**!

THIS IS THE **ONE**, MR. SPECTRUM. I SPOTTED HER **PHONY PASSPORT** WHEN SHE FIRST CROSSED INTO **MEXICO**. I THOUGHT YOUR DEPARTMENT MIGHT BE **INTERESTED** IN HER...

WE ARE **VERY** INTERESTED, MS. DURRELL... OR **WHATEVER** YOUR NAME IS.

WHEN SAM FIRST **CONTACTED** US, WE ATTEMPTED TO LOOK INTO YOUR **BACKGROUND**... ONLY TO FIND THAT YOU **HAVE NONE**! NO **BIRTH CERTIFICATE**, NO **FINGER-PRINTS**... **NOTHING**!

WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW **WHY**.

SILENCE. PSYCHOLOGICALLY, SHE TRIED TO **PREPARE** HERSELF FOR THIS MOMENT MANY TIMES, BUT NOW THAT IT HAS **COME** THERE ARE NO **WORDS**.

PERHAPS THIS IS NOT THE PROPER PLACE TO **TALK**. I WANT YOU BOTH TO COME WITH **ME**...

AND SO, A FEW MINUTES LATER...

THE SITUATION IS **THIS**, MS. DURRELL. WE HAVE CONTACTED **INTERPOL** AND INVESTIGATIVE AGENCIES IN EVERY MAJOR **COUNTRY**. PRIOR TO THE TIME YOU BEGAN APPEARING ON STAGE AS **VAMPIRELLA**, THEY HAVE NO **RECORD** OF YOU.

YOU **REALIZE**, OF COURSE, THAT SHOULD WE NOTIFY THE WORLD'S **IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES** OF THIS SITUATION, YOU WOULD LITERALLY BE A **WOMAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY**!

I DON'T THINK EITHER OF US WANT TO SEE THAT HAPPEN.

WHAT IS IT YOU **WANT** FROM ME?

A LITTLE **COOPERATION**, THAT'S ALL. WE COULD CONVENIENTLY **FORGET** THAT YOU ARE AN **ILLEGAL ALIEN** IN THIS COUNTRY... WE COULD EVEN ARRANGE TO GRANT YOU **CITIZENSHIP**. IF YOU AGREE TO **HELP US**...

FROM VARIOUS NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS OF YOUR **EXPLOITS**, IT APPEARS YOU ARE SOMEWHAT OF AN **ADVENTURESS**. RIGHT NOW, WE HAVE **NEED** OF SOMEONE WITH YOUR **QUALIFICATIONS**.

I WORK FOR AN **AGENCY** SIMILAR TO THE **CIA**. AT PRESENT, WE ARE INVOLVED IN A **DELICATE AFFAIR** WHICH REQUIRES SPECIAL **CAPABILITIES**.

TO PUT IT **BRIEFLY** AND **BLUNTLY**, MS. DURRELL, WE WANT YOU TO INFILTRATE A **WHITE SLAVERY RING**!

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, THE LIGHTS OF **SAN FRANCISCO HARBOR** CAST GLIMMERING, WAVERING **REFLECTIONS** OVER THE CHOPPY PACIFIC WATERS. BUT **VAMPIRELLA** IS UN-AWARE OF ITS **BEAUTY**, AS...

I CAN'T DISPEL THE FEELING THAT THERE'S **MORE** TO THIS AFFAIR THAN **SPECTRUM** HAS **TOLD** ME!

IT ALL SEEMED RATHER **CLEAR** TO ME. SIX WOMEN HAVE **DIS-APPEARED** FROM THE BAY AREA RECENTLY, ALL AFTER LEAVING THE **SILVER STEP TAVERN**.

SPECTRUM WANTS YOU TO GO THERE AND MAKE YOURSELF **VISIBLE**, HOPING THAT THE KID-NAPPERS WILL MAKE A MOVE TOWARDS YOU!

I'M AFRAID YOU'RE **RIGHT**, PENDY. BUT TO **SPECTRUM**, I'M ONLY A **TOOL**. HE DOESN'T GIVE A DAMN WHAT HAPPENS TO **ME**, ONLY HIS **MISSION**. I'M NOT **USED** TO DEALING WITH MEN LIKE THAT.

AND I'M NOT AFRAID TO ADMIT, I FEEL VERY **WEAK** AND **SCARED** RIGHT NOW.

AS SHE **ENTERS** THE SILVER STEP TAVERN. THE ROOM REEKS OF **ALCOHOL** AND THE SALT-STAINED CLOTHES OF THE SEAMEN WHO **DRINK** IT.

ODD, I THOUGHT I'D FACE EVERY SORT OF **HORROR IMAG-INABLE**, AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER. BUT **THIS** SCARES ME MORE THAN ANY OF THEM...!

SHE FEELS THE HOT, HUNGRY **STARES**, MENTALLY STRIPPING HER **DIGNITY** ALONG WITH HER **CLOTHES**. THERE IS ONLY THE THINNEST **VENEER** OF **CIVILIZATION** HERE, AND SHE CAN ALMOST FEEL THE COARSE, CALLOUSED HANDS GROPING TO **TOUCH** HER.

FOR THE PRESENT, THEY ARE CONTENT TO **FANTASIZE**, BUT SHE KNOWS IN A MOMENT, THAT RESPIRE WILL **END**.



YOU'RE **NEW** HERE, AREN'T YOU?

SHE TRIES TO **SUPPRESS** THE WAVE OF **NAUSEA** AND **DISGUST** THAT WELLS WITHIN HER.

YES, I'VE JUST **ARRIVED** IN TOWN AND--

GOOD! THAT MEANS YOU AIN'T GOT NO **BOYFRIEND** WAITIN' FER YA...OR NO **FAMILY**. IT MEANS YOU GOT NO PLACE TO GO **HOME** TO TONIGHT...!



IT **COULD** MEAN THAT.

I WISH I KNEW WHY HE'S **PROBING** FOR **INFORMATION**. DOES HE JUST WANT TO TAKE ME **HOME** FOR THE NIGHT, OR IS HE CONSIDERING ME A POTENTIAL **VICTIM**?



A GIRL COULD GET **LONESOME** IN A BIG CITY LIKE THIS. HOW'S ABOUT TAKIN' A **WALK** WITH OL' HORATIO...!

SO, A FEW MINUTES LATER...

IF IT TURNS OUT HE **IS** INNOCENT, I SHOULD BE ABLE TO **HANDLE** HIM ONE-TO-ONE. IF **NOT**, I'M PROBABLY WALKING RIGHT INTO THE **DRAGON'S MOUTH**!



YER THE **QUIET** TYPE, AIN'T YER?

FINE! MAYBE YOU'LL **STAY** QUIET WHILE WE **CHLOROFORM** YOU! CAP'N SILVER'S GONNA BE MIGHTY **PLEASED** WITH THIS SPECIMEN...!



THE OVERPOWERING ODOR OF THE **CHLOROFORM** ASSAULTS HER SENSES AND SHE **YIELDS** TO IT. IT'S **BETTER** THIS WAY, SHE THINKS, JUST BEFORE THE **BLACKNESS** SUBDUES HER.

IT IS AN **OLD** SHIP TO WHICH **VAMPIRELLA** IS CARRIED, ONE THAT HAS SEEN MANY VOYAGES, AND WHOSE WEATHERED HULL IS UNLIKELY TO SUSTAIN MANY **MORE**. BUT SHE IS UNAWARE OF **THAT**, OR ANY **OTHER** FACT.

WE'D BETTER GET HER OUT TO THE ISLAND **IMMEDIATELY**. CAP'N SILVER'LL WANT TO START ON **THIS** ONE **RIGHT AWAY**...!



WITHIN THE HOLD, **CONSCIOUSNESS** RETURNS TO VAMPIRELLA. SHE CLOSES HER MIND TO **PANIC** AND SEARCHES HER MAKESHIFT PRISON **THOROUGHLY AND EXPEDITIOUSLY.**

SPECTRUM WANTED ME TO FIND WHO WAS **BEHIND** THIS WHITE SLAVERY OPERATION.

IT APPEARS I'M GOING TO DO **JUST THAT...**!

THE BOAT DOCKS, AND THE MEN **COME** FOR HER. GRUFFLY, THEIR HARD HANDS CLUTCH HER TANNED FLESH AND SHOVE HER ASHORE...

DON'T GET ANY IDEAS ABOUT **RUNNIN'**, GIRL. THIS ISLAND'S FULL OF **SWAMPS** AND **MARSHLAND**. IF THE **SNAKES** DON'T GET YOU, THE QUICKSAND WILL.

SHE DIDN'T HEAR THE RUSTLE OF **FOOTSTEPS** OVER THEIR OWN. SHE DIDN'T HEAR THE MUR-MERED SIGH OF **APPROVAL** FROM THE **PARCHED LIPS** OF CAPTAIN SILVER... HIS SUD-DEN APPEARANCE WAS, IN EVERY RESPECT, A **TOTAL SURPRISE.**

MOST **DECORATIVE**, HORATIO. I MUST SAY, YOUR TASTE IS **IMPROVING.**

I THINK A FORMAL **INTRODUCTION** WOULD BE IN ORDER. I AM CAPTAIN **ALGERNON SILVER**, **COMMANDER** OF THIS LITTLE OPERATION. **AND YOU?**

VALERIE DURRELL... AND I SUPPOSE YOU COULD SAY MY PROFESSION IS GETTING PICKED UP IN **BARS** BY MEN LIKE **HORATIO** HERE.

SO AS NOT TO CAUSE YOU UNDUE **CONSTERNATION**, LET ME EXPLAIN WHAT WILL **HAPPEN** FROM THIS POINT.

YOU SHALL BE MY **GUEST** ON THIS ISLAND FOR ABOUT A MONTH. DURING THAT TIME YOU WILL UNDERGO A PROCESS OF... EH, **ADJUSTMENT...** SO THAT YOU WILL BE MORE COMPATIBLE TO OUR **DEMANDS.**

YOU MEAN I AM TO BE **BRAINWASHED?**

THAT WORD HAS SUCH **UNPLEASANT CONNOTATIONS**. BUT FOR PRACTICAL PURPOSES... **YES.**

AND THEN WHAT?



THEN YOU WILL BE SOLD, PERHAPS TO AN ARABIAN **SHEIK** OR A JAPANESE **MANDARIN**. IN ANY EVENT, IT WILL BE SOMEONE OF CONSIDERABLE **WEALTH** AND **AUTHORITY**.

WHY? ARE THEY THAT HARD UP FOR **WOMEN** IN OTHER COUNTRIES?



THEY WILL ALWAYS PAY A GOOD PRICE FOR A WOMAN OF **YOUR** CALIBRE.

BUT IT IS ONLY **PART** OF THE OPERATION. FOR **THAT**, NO INDOCTRINATION WOULD BE NECESSARY. THE REASON FOR OUR **PROGRAM** IS THAT...



...WHEN THE TIME COMES, YOU WILL BE CALLED UPON TO **ASSASSINATE** YOUR MASTER: THINK OF THE **CHAOS** IT WOULD CREATE IF POLITICAL LEADERS THE WORLD OVER WERE **MURDERED** AT **PRECISELY** THE SAME MOMENT!

OF COURSE, THROUGH **SUGGESTION**, NONE OF THE GIRLS WOULD EVEN **REMEMBER** WHAT THEY HAD DONE! IT'S **PERFECT!**



THESE WILL BE YOUR **QUARTERS** DURING YOUR STAY HERE. NOT THE MOST ELEGANT **ACCOMMODATIONS**, I GRANT YOU, BUT AT LEAST YOU'LL HAVE THE **COMPANY** OF THE OTHER **WOMEN**...

...THOUGH I **DOUBT** YOU'LL FIND THEM VERY **TALKATIVE!**



MASS POLITICAL ASSASSINATION! NO **WONDER** SPECTRUM'S PEOPLE WERE SO CONCERNED ABOUT THIS OPERATION. THEY MUST HAVE KNOWN **ALL** **ALONG...**!

AND THESE POOR WOMEN... LIKE **MANNEQUINS...**!

WORST OF ALL, I STILL HAVEN'T HAD TIME TO REPLACE THE **BLOOD SUBSTITUTE** SERUM. IN A MATTER OF **HOURS**, THE **THIRST** WILL BE UPON ME AGAIN!

SHE IS A WOMAN NOT USED TO **CAPTIVITY**. THE HOURS PASS SLOWLY, AND AS DARKNESS SETS IN, SHE BECOMES A TRAPPED **ANIMAL**, NERVOUSLY STALKING THE CONFINES OF HER **CAGE**.

CAN'T **CONTROL** IT ANY LONGER... **MUST... FEED...**!

A TRAPPED, **HUNGRY** ANIMAL.

ULTIMATELY, SHE **SUCCUMBS** TO HER PERVERSIVE LUST... ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY **SEEM!**

WHAT?! THEY'RE **BLOODLESS!**

THESE ARE NOT **WOMEN...** THEY'RE **CYBERNAUTS!**

DIDN'T WANT TO TAKE THE CHANCE THAT THE **GUARDS** WOULD RETURN AND FIND ME MISSING... BUT NOW IT LOOKS LIKE I'LL **HAVE** TO.

CAN'T SAY I'M **SORRY**. HORATIO IS A MUCH MORE **DESERVING** VICTIM ANYWAY.

THE **FEAR** AND THE **SELF-DOUBTS** ARE **DISPELLED**. SHE IS NO LONGER THE **PREY**, SHE IS THE **HUNTER**... AND **WHATEVER HAPPENS**, IT IS SHE WHO HAS TAKEN CONTROL OF HER **FATE**.

A **LIGHT...** IT LOOKS LIKE **HORATIO'S** ROOM!

HOW DID YOU--?

I'LL ASK THE QUESTIONS... AND WE'LL START BY LEARNING MORE ABOUT CAPTAIN SILVER'S **PROCESS**. IT'S **MORE** THAN MERE **BRAINWASHING**, ISN'T IT?

YES. IT AFFECTS THE WOMEN'S **BODIES** AS WELL AS THEIR **MINDS**. SILVER GIVES THEM **CHEMICAL INJECTIONS** WHICH ALTER THEIR **METABOLISM** FROM FLESH AND BLOOD TO **SYNTHETIC PLASTIC**.

WHY?

IT IS THE MEANS BY WHICH CAP'TN SILVER INTENDS TO KILL OFF THE WORLD'S **LEADERS**. YOU SEE, EACH OF THE GIRLS WILL BE DELIVERED TO THEIR RESPECTIVE **MASTERS** THE **SAME DAY...**

NATURALLY, THAT NIGHT, THE MEN WILL WANT TO... EH, **CONSUMMATE** THE AGREEMENT...!

SO?

SO THE GIRLS BODIES ARE **TREATED** IN SUCH A WAY THAT WHEN THEIR MASTER'S REACH **SATISFACTION**, A **CHEMICAL REACTION** WILL TAKE PLACE, CAUSING AN **EXPLOSION!**

GOOD GOD!





SHE WATCHES, HER SOUL **SWELLING** WITH GUILT AND HORROR. INSTINCTIVELY, SHE WANTS TO **REACH OUT** AND END THIS MAN'S **SUFFERING**.

BUT THERE ARE **OTHER** THINGS TO BE CONSIDERED. THE MAN BEFORE HER IS AN EVIL, **CRUEL** MAN.



THE MOMENT FOR **CHOICE** PASSES, NOW THERE IS ONLY TIME FOR **RE-GRET**. SHE FINDS SHE CANNOT HOLD BACK THE TEARS FOR **INNOCENCE LOST...**



SUDDENLY... FROM THE PRISON...



DEAD... ALL OF THEM! THE SAILORS MUST'VE TRIED TO **RAPE** THE **CYBERNAUTS!**



I HOPE MR SPECTRUM IS **SATISFIED...**

A FEW DAYS LATER, ON THE MAINLAND...

YOU'VE DONE US ALL A GREAT **SERVICE**, MS. DURRELL. NOW I'M GOING TO FULFILL **MY** PART OF THE DEAL.



HERE IS A FULLY LEGAL **BIRTH CERTIFICATE** AND **PASS-PORT**, NOT TO MENTION **CITIZENSHIP** PAPERS, ISSUED TO **VALERIE DURRELL**... NO OTHER QUESTIONS ASKED!

I STILL CAN'T FORGET THAT I LET CAPTAIN SILVER **DIE** TO PRESERVE MY **SECRET**. HOW DO I EASE MY MIND OF **THAT**?

IT'S SOMETHING YOU'LL HAVE TO LEARN TO **LIVE** WITH, AND I DON'T **ENVY** YOU THAT TASK.



BUT AS FOR ME, I'LL STICK TO THE OLD ADAGE... **FORGIVE AND FORGET.**

ORPHEUS IS THE RELIGION OF THE PEOPLE

I LIT ANOTHER CIGARETTE, JUST AS WE HIT THE **TRESTLE-BRIDGE** OUTSIDE MYSTIC, CONNECTICUT. (IT WOULD BE A GOOD **THREE HOURS** BEFORE THE TRAIN MADE NEW YORK CITY, BUT ALREADY I WAS GETTING **RESTLESS**.)



OUTSIDE, THE HARBOR LIGHTS SHONE LIKE **NICE-EYES** IN THE DISTANCE... A CANDLEMAS PROCESSION DOWN THE FARAWAY HILLSIDE OVERLOOKING THE BASIN OF THE VALLEY. **THEY**, ALONG WITH THE STEADY STACCATO **RYTHM** OF THE COACH, SHOULD HAVE LULLED ME TO **SLEEP**. THEY **DIDN'T**.

I WAS ON MY WAY TO A CITY THAT HAD NEVER KNOWN A CHORUS OF **CACKETS**, NOR THE PUNGENT SMELL OF FRESH-SHORN WHEAT CARRIED BY A CRISP MORNING BREEZE; THE NOTION **DAMPENED** ME.

BUT I REMEMBERED, AS A **KID**, A FACELESS VOICE ON THE TV SAYING THAT THERE WERE **EIGHT MILLION STORIES** IN THE **NAKED C/TY**. TONIGHT I WAS LOOKING FOR ONE OF THEM... THE ONE THAT **KILLED MY SISTER**.

THE ONE THEY CALLED THE **ABOMINABLE SHOWMAN**.

HE WASN'T TWELVE FEET TALL NOR COVERED WITH WHITE SHAGGY **FUR**, BUT HE WAS A **MONSTER**... THE KIND THAT FEEDS **HEROIN** TO SEVENTEEN YEAR OLD **RUNAWAYS**.

SOME CLEVER **JUNKIE** PROBABLY THOUGHT UP THE NICKNAME... "HEY, I NEED SOME **SNOW**, MAN!" THE **SHOWMAN'S** REAL NAME WAS CHARLIE COOKE.

I WAS GOING TO **KILL** HIM.



NOT THAT I BLAMED HIM **PERSONALLY** FOR WHAT HAPPENED TO SUSIE. IT TAKES **TWO** TO MAKE AN ADDICT, SO AT LEAST **HALF** THE BLAME FALLS ON MY **KID SISTER**.



BUT YOU DON'T SPARE THE **TARANTULA** JUST BECAUSE IT BEARS NO PERSONAL **MALICE** WHEN IT BITES.

NURSING MY BOURBON-AND-WATER, I CONSIDERED *HOW* I WOULD KILL HIM. IT MUST BE *SLOW*, EXQUISITELY *PAINFUL*. I DECIDED... LIKE THE TWO-YEAR DISINTEGRATION OF A HEALTHY, VIBRANT *TEENYBOPPER* INTO A WOUNDED *ANIMAL*.



I LEARNED *MOST* OF THE DETAILS FROM A *DARY* THE POLICE FOUND. THE ENTRIES WERE OFTEN *NOOHERENT* AND OUT OF SEQUENCE, BUT THEY TOLD HOW *COOKE* HAD TAKEN HER IN OFF THE STREETS, PRIMED HER WITH *KINDNESS*, AND HANDED HER A *SPIKE*.

SHE *LIVED* WITH HIM *SIX MONTHS* AFTERWARDS, TILL HE FOUND AN *OTHER* *YOUNG RUNAWAY*. STALE AND OVERUSED, *SUSIE* WAS THROWN OUT OF THE APARTMENT. THE ONLY TIME SHE SAW THE *SNOWMAN* AFTER THAT WAS WHEN SHE NEEDED A *CONNECTION*.



ONCE, ABOUT A YEAR AGO, SHE WAS CONVINCED THAT THE DEVIL HAD TAKEN POSSESSION OF HER SOUL, SO SHE TRIED TO BURN IT OUT...

...WITH ACID!

TILL THEN SHE'D SUPPORTED HIS HABIT BY LEAVING HER BODY TO ANYTHING WITH A *WALLER*.



BUT THERE ISN'T MUCH OF A MARKET FOR DISFIGURED *HOOKERS*...SO SHE FOUND OTHERS *WAYS*.



THOUGH THEY COULDN'T *PROVE* IT, POLICE WERE *CERTAIN* SHE'D SHOT AND KILLED AN OLD STOREKEEPER IN *CHELSEA* A FEW MONTHS BACK... FOR SIXTEEN DOLLARS AND CHANGE.



LAST WEEK, A JANITOR FOUND HER, IN THE BALCONY OF A FORTY SECOND STREET *MOVIEHOUSE*, AFTER EVERYONE ELSE HAD GONE. SHE'D *DIED* HALFWAY THROUGH "THE DEVIL IN MISS JONES."



NO ONE HAD *NOTICED*.

THE POLICE MADE A ROUTINE SEARCH FOR THE SNOWMAN, THEN DROPPED THE CASE INTO THEIR **OPEN** FILE. IF CHARLIE COOKE WALKED IN AND **SURRENDERED** HIMSELF TO THE DESK SARGEANT, THEY'D **BOOK** HIM. OTHERWISE, HE WAS **FORGOTTEN**.

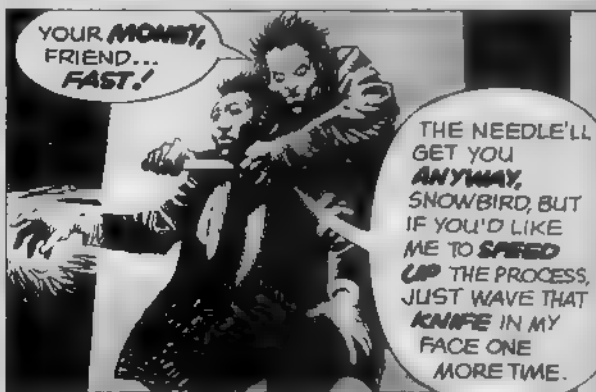


I FINISHED MY DRINK, WHICH COULD'VE PROPELLED A **VENUS PROBE**. THEN SLEPT AWHILE. EVENTUALLY, THE MANHATTAN **SKYLINE** APPEARED ON THE HORIZON, A SUPINE **GLAMOUR QUEEN** LYING NUDE ON A BED OF DARKNESS. HER FACE WAS WET WITH AUTUMN RAIN.

AS THE TRAIN EASED INTO PENN STATION TUNNEL, I WAS STILL WITHOUT A DEFINITE **TACTIC**.



LEAVING THE TERMINAL, I WALKED ALONG 7TH AVENUE, TOWARD **TIMES SQUARE**. THE ORIGINAL CLUMP OF PEOPLE DISSOLVED, FILTERING OFF INTO TAXIS, SUBWAY STATIONS, AND HOT DOG STANDS. BY THE TIME I REACHED 32TH STREET, I WAS ALONE **ALMOST**.



I PROBED THE DESPERATE, BLACK-PEARL EYES. THE PUPILS WERE THE SIZE OF **LINT-SPECKS**, FLICKERING LIKE A **STROBE**. HIS BONY FINGERS **TWITCHED** ON THE HANDLE OF HIS WEAPON....



I COULD EASILY HAVE **DISARMED** HIM AND TURNED HIM IN. IF I HADN'T BEEN IN SUCH A **SOOR MOOD**, I PROBABLY **WOULD** HAVE.

INSTEAD, FOR **EXPEDIENCY'S** SAKE, I KICKED HIM IN THE GROIN, AND LEFT HIM **WRITHING** IN THE ALLEY.



IT'S A FUNNY THING ABOUT 42ND STREET. AT EYE LEVEL, YOU SEE ENOUGH **MOV** TO LIGHT UP THE **DARK AGES**, BUT IF YOU LOOK JUST **ABOVE** THE MOVIE MARQUEES, AND THE "SIX BEAUTIFUL GIRLS EVERY HOUR" SIGNS, YOU'LL SEE THE SAME FLAT, BANAL BUILDINGS THAT INSPIRED **URBAN RENEWAL**.



IN **ONE** OF THESE, I WOULD FIND A LEAD TO CHARLIE COOKE.

SOMEWHERE IN THE DISJOINTED PAGES OF HER DIARY, SUSIE MADE A PASSING REFERENCE TO A MAN NAMED **SAKS**. HE MADE THE KIND OF MOVIES THAT WERE CALLED **BLUE**, WHILE THEY PUT THEIR PRODUCERS IN THE **BLACK**.



SUSIE **WORKED** FOR HIM ONCE, BEFORE THE **ACC** CUT SHORT HER SCREEN CAREER.

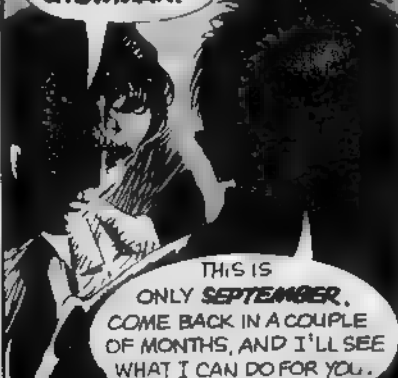
NOW HE RAN A **PEEPSHOW** OPERATION, EXHIBITING HIS OWN PRODUCT. WORD HAD IT, HE STILL USED THE **SNOWMAN** TO PROCURE BODIES FOR HIS "EPICS".



SAKS?

YEAH. YOU VICE SQUAD?

I'M LOOKING FOR THE **SNOWMAN**.



THIS IS ONLY **SEPTEMBER**. COME BACK IN A COUPLE OF MONTHS, AND I'LL SEE WHAT I CAN DO FOR YOU.

I SAW HIS HAND MOVE FURTIVELY TOWARD THE **ALARM** WHICH WOULD NO DOUBT SUMMON THE **REINFORCEMENTS**. I WONDERED WHY A MAN WHO MAKES A **BUFFALO** LOOK SMALL WOULD **NEED** HIRED MUSCLE.

I'M LOOKING FOR THE **SNOWMAN**.



AND I'M LOOKIN' FOR THE **POT O'GOLD** AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW NOW ARE YOU GONNA **BUY** SOMETHIN OR JUST STAND THERE AND MAKE **NOISE**?

I WOULD TRY IT **ONE** MORE TIME.



I'M LOOKING FOR THE **SNOWMAN**.

WHAT IS THIS, **CANDID CAMERA**? NOW LISTEN

THE FINGERS INCHED SLOWLY, JUST SHY OF THE **ALARM**.



THEY NEVER **MADE** IT.

I'M LOOKING FOR THE **SNOWMAN**.

AAARGH!

DAMNED IF HE DIDN'T **ANSWER** ME THAT TIME.

THERE'S NOTHING **AMUSING** ABOUT AN **AMUSEMENT PARK** AT **MIDNIGHT**... ESPECIALLY AN **ABANDONED** ONE. I STOOD IN THE CENTER OF THE MIDWAY FEELING LIKE ALICE IN A NIGHTMARE-WONDERLAND.

I LISTENED AS NIGHT WINDS WHISTLED THROUGH THE **CAROUSEL**... AND BREATHED EERIE LIFE INTO ITS OLD **CALLIOPE**. I HEARD, TOO, THE CREAK OF THE FERRIS WHEEL **SEATS** AS THEY SWAYED IN THE BREEZE, AND THE RHYTHMIC POUNDING OF THE **SEAS** ON THE NEARBY BEACH.

HERE, AMONG THE DESERTED ARTIFACTS OF **CONEY ISLAND**, I WOULD FIND THE SNOWMAN... IF **SAND** WAS TELLING THE TRUTH.

HIS STORY SEEMED **PLAUSIBLE** ENOUGH: IT SEEMS THAT AFTER HER AFFAIR WITH **COOKE ENDED**, MY SISTER LINKED UP WITH A SYNDICATE **HIT MAN** NAMED **JACK ROY**. AT FIRST HE **ATTIED** HER DISFIGUREMENT.

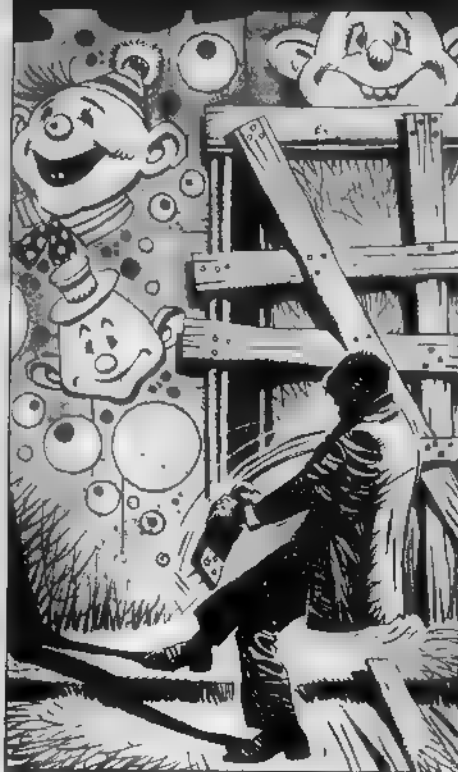
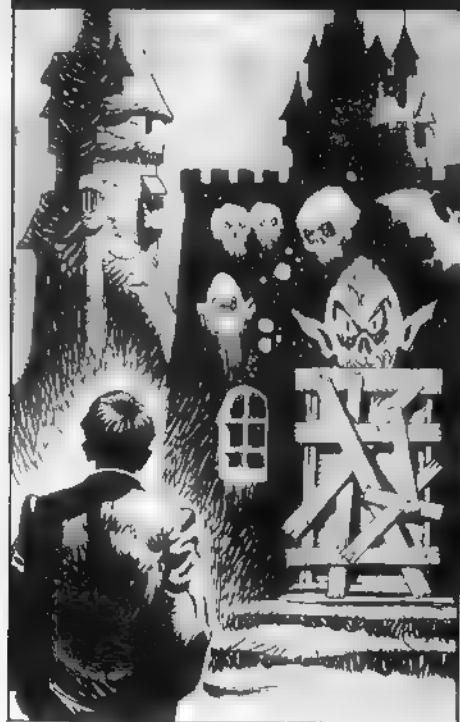
SUSIE'S ADDICTION **UPSET** HIM AND, MORE THAN ONCE, HE TRIED TO INDUCE HER TO KICK THE HABIT, BUT SHE NEVER **COULD STAND THE TASTE OF COLD TURKEY**.

ROY TOOK IT PRETTY HARD, AND WORD WENT AROUND IT WAS **OFFEN SEASON** ON **SNOWMEN**, WHO DUE TO THEIR PECULIAR CONSTRUCTION, **MELT UNDER INTENSE HEAT**. **CHARLIE COOKE** WENT UNDERGROUND.

GRADUALLY THE **PITY** TURNED TO **LOVE**.

THE LAST PACKET SHE GOT WAS LACED WITH **STRYCHNINE**.

HIS ONLY CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD, SINCE **SUSIE'S** DEATH, WAS **EDGAR SAKS**. IT WAS A DEAD CERTAINTY MY **ARRIVAL** WAS **EXPECTED**.



IF CHARLIE COOKE *WAS* HERE, HE WAS IN GOOD COMPANY. JACK THE RIPPER, BLUEBEARD, ALISTAIR ARCHAEUS AND *OTHER* INFAMOUS KILLERS OF HISTORY MADE UP THE *FIRST* WAXWORKS EXHIBIT.



THE SNOWMAN WAS ESSENTIALLY IN THE SAME BUSINESS. ALL HE LACKED WAS THEIR *STYLE*.

I GROPED AND CLAWED THROUGH A LABYRINTH OF CORRIDORS AND WONDERED IF HELEN KELLER STARTED THIS WAY. FINALLY, I CAME UPON ANOTHER *DISPLAY*.



I HAD TO GIVE THE SCULPTOR *CREDIT*... THEY WERE SO LIFELIKE, I'D HAVE SWORN ONE OF THEM WAS *BREATHING*.

AS IT TURNED OUT, *ALL* OF THEM WERE BREATHING. I GRUNTED AN OBSCENITY AS KING KONG'S HAND CLAMPED LIKE A BEAR-TRAP OVER MY MOUTH. IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT THE GORILLA HAD KNOWN SOME PRETTY LEAN YEARS.

AFTER ALL, I WAS A *FAK* GRY FROM *RAY* WRAY.

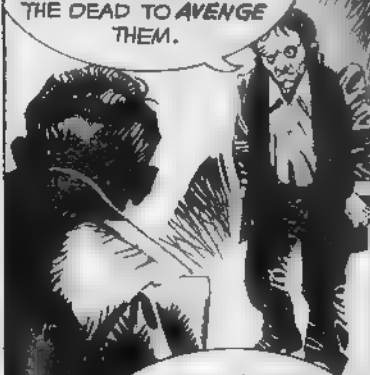


THEY TOOK ME TO WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN A SET FOR "THE PERILS OF PAULINE"... THE OLD *SAW* MILL WHERE THE VILLAIN PLANNED TO MAKE *TWINS* OF PEARL WHITE.

THE SNOWMAN MUST HAVE *RECOGNIZED* ME FROM A PHOTO IN SUSIE'S PURSE. WHEN HE SAW ME, HE SMILED LIKE A *MOUSE* IN A *CHEESE* FACTORY.



HOW REFRESHINGLY *OLD-FASHIONED*! A SELF-PROCLAIMED HERO.. A MAN WHO ACTUALLY *CARES* ENOUGH ABOUT THE DEAD TO *AVENGE* THEM.



I'M NO *HERO*. SNOWMAN. NEVER WAS AND NEVER WILL BE. I HAVE NO PRETENSIONS OF NOBILITY, NO DESIRE TO PROTECT THE WORLD FROM YOUR KIND OF *EVIL*.

I'M SIMPLY HERE TO SATISFY MY OWN *BLOODLUST*. THAT MAKES ME NO BETTER THAN YOU, EXCEPT I'M A LITTLE MORE SELECTIVE ABOUT MY *VICTIMS*.





WHATEVER HE SAID **NEXT** WAS DROWNED OUT BY THE **SHRILL DRONE** OF A **BUZZ SAW**. **KING KONG**, AND THE **WOLFMAN** WHO LOOKED LIKE HIS **YOUNGER BROTHER**, CAME UP BEHIND ME.



I ALWAYS FIGURED MY **ARMY TRAINING** WOULD BE GOOD FOR **SOMETHING**, **SOMEDAY**, **BESIDES** ATTACKING **YELLOW MUNCHKINS** IN **RICE FIELDS**. I WAS **RIGHT**.



WHOEVER WAS INSIDE THE **WEREWOLF COSTUME** WAS **DECIDEDLY HUMAN**. I COULD TELL BY THE **SCREAM**, AND THE **FLESH, BLOOD**, AND **FUR** THAT **SPRAYED** THE ROOM WHEN HE HIT THE **BUZZ SAW**.

APPARENTLY THE **OLD MACHINE** WASN'T USED TO **WORKING THAT HARD**. THERE WAS A **FLASH** THAT MIGHT'VE RIVALLED A **NOVA**, THEN **UTTER BLACKNESS**. I **FROZE**, ESTIMATING THE **DISTANCE** BETWEEN ME AND THE **SMELLY** **AROUND ME**.

WHEN THE **TIMES** CAME, I **MANAGED** TO **BREAK** **KING KONG'S** **NECK** WITH **ONE SWAP**.

I WAS ABOUT TO **DO** THE SAME TO THE **FRANKENSTEIN MONSTER**, WHEN SOMEBODY PUT A **BULLET** THROUGH HIS **HEART**.



AS HE **TORE OFF** HIS **MASK**, THE **ICE-BULLET EYES** ANSWERED MY **UNSPOKEN QUESTION**. THIS MAN WAS A **PROFESSIONAL**.



IN FACT, HE'S AS **DEAD** AS THAT UNFORTUNATE GENTLEMAN THE SNOWMAN SENT OUTSIDE TO REPORT YOUR **ARRIVAL** EARLIER. I CAME UPON HIM FIRST AND DECIDED HIS **COSTUME** WOULD BE USEFUL. IT WAS.

SUSIE WAS REALLY SOMETHIN' SPECIAL, WASN'T SHE? I MEAN HAVING **TWO** MEN WILLING TO KILL IN HER NAME...!

LIKE YOU SAID, WE'RE NOT **CRUSADERS**. WE DON'T AVENGE OUT OF **RIGHTEOUSNESS**... WE DO IT BECAUSE WE'RE **VIOLENT MEN**. BY KILLING SUSIE, HE TOOK SOMETHING AWAY FROM US THAT WE BOTH **NEEDED**...!

I NEVER WAS MUCH GOOD AT **CRYING**, SO **KILLING** IS THE ONLY WAY I KNOW TO GET THE **PAIN** OUT

WE CAUGHT UP TO THE SNOWMAN IN THE **HALL OF MIRRORS**. JACK ROY'S GUN ROARED LIKE A LION WITH A CACTUS UP ITS BACKSIDE, AND WE WATCHED A **THOUSAND** CHARLIE COOKIES FALL.

THE SNOWMAN DIDN'T WIMPER OR PLEAD OR ANYTHING ELSE, AS JACK ROY TOOK THE **SYRINGE** OUT OF HIS POCKET. NOR DID HE FLINCH AS THE NEEDLE WENT **BRUTALLY** INTO HIS ARM.

I JUST STOOD THERE, GRINNING LIKE A **VOYEUR** AT A **ROMAN ORGY**.

THE REVENGE WAS EVERYTHING WE'D **HOPED** IT WOULD BE. THE SNOWMAN SCREAMED AND CRIED AS THE DRUG ATE THROUGH HIS SYSTEM. EVERYWHERE HE TURNED WAS THE SAD, PAIN-WASHED FACE OF ANOTHER **ADDICT**...

WE LEFT ONE HOUSE OF HORRORS BEHIND AND WALKED OUT INTO THE **BIGGER ONE**... THE CITY.

...AND THEY ALL LOOKED LIKE **HIM**. BY THE TIME IT **KILLED** HIM, WE HAD SEEN CHARLIE COOKE **DIE** FIVE THOUSAND TIMES.

THE STREETS WEREN'T ANY **CLEANER** FOR THE LOSS OF CHARLIE COOKE. THE WEATHER WAS GETTING **COLDER** AND THE KIDS WOULD SOON BUILD **ANOTHER** SNOWMAN. I GUESS I WASN'T QUITE AS **DETACHED** AS JACK ROY... I **CRIED**.

END

THE **PROFESSIONAL** RECHECKED THE **CONTENTS** OF THE SLIM BLACK WALISE CAREFULLY, THEN SNAPPED SHUT THE METAL STUDS WITH A TIGHT **SMILE**.



HE TURNED TO THE OVAL MIRROR ABOVE HIS BUREAU AND DEEPENED THE TUCK ON HIS **EXPENSIVE** SILK TIE, FINGERS MOVING WITH PRACTICED EASE, EYES CAREFULLY SCRUTINIZING HIS **NEATLY** COMBED HAIR. HE PAUSED ONLY LONG ENOUGH TO FRESHEN THE STRONG **MUSKY** SCENT OF HIS AFTERSHAVE.



HE RAN A WHISK BROOM BRISKLY ACROSS HIS **NEWLY** PRESSED SUIT, GRABBED THE HOUSE KEYS OFF THE COFFEE TABLE AND STEPPED INTO THE **WARM** SPRING SUN OF SANTA MIRA, CALIFORNIA.



HE TOOK A DEEP BREATH. HE **GRINNED**. A ROBIN DIPPED LOW OVER THE SHAKE-SHINGLE ROOFS, PAST THE **CAREFULLY** PRUNED ROWS OF SHRUBBERY, ARROWING DOWN THE ALBASTER LENGTH OF SIDEWALK BEFORE HIM. HIS SMILE **WIDENED**, SHOWING TWIN ROWS OF **SPARKLING** WHITE, PERFECTLY EVEN TEETH. IT WAS A **BEAUTIFUL** NEW DAY. IT WAS A **BEAUTIFUL** NEW NEIGHBORHOOD. IT WOULD BE A **BEAUTIFUL** NEW **BEGINNING**...!

THE Professional



THE PROFESSIONAL WENT TO **WORK**...!

THE **FIRST** HOUSE ON HIS **LIST** BELONGED TO THE KETCHUMS. IT WAS IN THE TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLAR RANGE. THAT WAS **GOOD**. MRS. KETCHUM WAS ROUGHLY FORTY - TWO YEARS OLD, FAIRLY ATTRACTIVE, NON-WORKING, **WITHOUT** CHILDREN. MR. KETCHUM WORKED **ALL** DAY. THAT WAS **GOOD TOO**.



MRS. KETCHUM WAS **BORED** WITH HOUSE WORK. SHE LIKED TO MARKET EARLY AND WATCH THE SOAP OPERAS IN THE AFTERNOON. THAT WAS WHY HE PICKED HER HOUSE **FIRST**.

YES? WHO IS IT?

GOOD MORNING MRS. KETCHUM. LOVELY DAY ISN'T IT? MY NAME IS **PETER GRANT**... I'M WITH REVEL GROOMING MAY I HAVE A **MOMENT** OF YOUR TIME?



WELL... I'M **REALLY NOT DRESSED!** PERHAPS ANOTHER TIME--

WOULD YOU JUST **LOOK** AT THOSE CLOUDS? **CUMULONIMBUS MARVELOUS!** REMINDS YOU OF THE SPRING DAYS OF YOUR **CHILDHOOD**, DOESN'T IT? AND SMELL THAT **AIR**...

YES... M-M-M! OUR **FIRST** REAL SPRING DAY! I **LOVE** THE SPRING! EVERYTHING IS **SO...** **SO FRESH AND ALIVE!**



A TIME TO BEGIN LIFE **ANEW!**

WHY, **YES**, I JUST PUT ON A POT. WOULD YOU **CARE** FOR A CUP, MR... MR...

OH!... THAT WOULDN'T BE FRESH COFFEE WOULD IT? (SNIF-SNIF) I HAVEN'T HAD A CUP IN **WEEKS**-- ON THE **GO** SO MUCH, YOU UNDERSTAND. SMELLS **DELIGHTFUL**...!



...**GRANT. PETER GRANT. I'D LOVE** A CUP THANK YOU **MY!** THIS IS **LOVELY!** WHERE DID YOU **EVER** FIND A DECENT INTERIOR DECORATOR?

WHAT, **THIS?** OH, I DID IT **MYSELF!**

NO! BUT THIS IS **CHARMING!** YOU'RE A **PROFESSIONAL** THEN?



ME? OH, MY **NO!** I'M JUST A **HOUSEWIFE!**

I HOPE YOU DON'T MIND THE **CURLERS**, MR. GRANT. ONE LUMP OR TWO?

WO. AND I'D **HARDLY** NOTICED.

OH! YOUR DAUGHTER PERHAPS?



WHY, **GRACIOUS**, MR. GRANT-- THAT'S **ME!** TAKEN ONLY **LAST YEAR!** OF COURSE, I HAD **MAKE-UP** ON THEN AND THESE **ROLLERS** OUT OF MY HAIR....!

AMAZING! BUT I WOULD HAVE **SWORN** ... YOU LOOK **ALMOST EXACTLY** LIKE ... LIKE--

FORGIVE ME... I'M **SORRY**...



LIKE **WHOM**, MR. GRANT?

BUT... **WHY?**

MRS. KETCHUM... I REALIZE WE'VE ONLY **JUST MET**... BUT I WONDER IF YOU'D DO AN **ENORMOUS FAVOR** FOR ME? I WONDER IF YOU'D CONSIDER TAKING **DOWN** YOUR **HAIR?**







I FEEL LIKE...LIKE I'M IN A DREAM! LIKE I'M **EIGHTEEN** AGAIN AND IT'S THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING AND YOU'RE A BOY I ONCE KNEW...

M-M-M! SMELL THAT AIR, PETER! GOD! HAVE YOU EVER FELT SO **ABSOLUTELY YOUNG** AND **VITAL** AND **ALIVE**? HAVE YOU EVER BEEN **MORE IN LOVE** WITH LIFE?

I HAVE TO GO.



GO? NOW? I THOUGHT PERHAPS WE COULD --

I HAVE TO GET TO **WORK**. I'LL BE **BEHIND** IN MY QUOTA...!



HOW...HOW MUCH DO YOU **MAKE** IN ONE DAY, PETER?

DEPENDS. ABOUT **THIRTY DOLLARS**.



COULDN'T YOU STAY... JUST ANOTHER **HOUR**...?



THE PROFESSIONAL MOVED DOWN THE KETCHUM'S FRONT WALK AND BACK OUT INTO THE **NEIGHBORHOOD**. HE GLANCED AT HIS WATCH. IT WAS STILL **EARLY** ENOUGH TIME TO MAKE **ANOTHER STOP**.



MRS. FLETCHER WAS PRESIDENT OF THE **SANTA MIRA GARDEN SOCIETY**. SHE HAD A **BOY** AWAY AT COLLEGE, A **DALMATIAN** NAMED **ROGUEFORT**, A **HUSBAND** THAT **CHAIN-SMOKED** AND A **LARGE COLLECTION OF PORCELAIN FROGS**. SHE **HATED** ALL FOUR.

I'M NOT **SURE**... SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR **EYES**. WOULD YOU DO ME A VERY GREAT FAVOR, MRS. FLETCHER? WOULD YOU MIND **REMOVING** YOUR GLASSES?



WHY, THAT'S **REMARKABLE!** ...**QUITE REMARKABLE!**



MR. GRANT! **REALLY!** I... I MUST **INSIST!** I... OH, DEAR!... OH, DEAR...!

MRS. CORNWELL WAS A **WIDOW**. HER **THIRD** HUSBAND DIED ABRUPTLY, LEAVING HER WITH A TWENTY-THOUSAND DOLLAR INSURANCE POLICY. HER **FOURTH** HUSBAND DIED TRYING TO **SPEND** IT. MRS. CORNWELL RARELY LEFT HER EIGHT ROOM HOUSE NOW. SHE DIDN'T **TRUST** MEN, SHE **DID**, ON THE OTHER HAND, **TRUST** CATS...

TAISEY **LIKES** YOU, MR. GRANT. THAT'S **RARE!** AND TAISEY IS A FINE **JUDGE** OF CHARACTER!

MY LATE **WIFE** WAS QUITE FOND OF CATS, DID I MENTION?



AND MAY I SAY YOU REMIND ME VERY **MUCH** OF HER? IT'S NOT **EVERYONE** WHO CAN COMMUNICATE WITH CATS, YOU KNOW... **REALLY** COMMUNICATE...

OH, MR. GRANT, THAT'S **SO TRUE**.



YOU'RE SURE THAT WILL BE **ENOUGH**, PETER? I HAVE PLENTY MORE...



MRS. CARMICHAEL WAS AN **ASPIRING** ACTRESS. THOUGH SHE HADN'T ACHIEVED FURTHER **STAGE** SUCCESS SINCE A **WALK-ON** IN A JUNIOR HIGH ASSEMBLY, SHE WAS EVER HOPEFUL, EVER IN PREPARATION. HER HUSBAND WAS LESS **ENTHUSIASTIC**...

... I WAS THE **SHORE**, PETER DARLING, AND YOU WERE THE **SEA**... POUNDING YOUR **WAVES** OF PASSION AGAINST MY RECKLESS BEACH AS I --

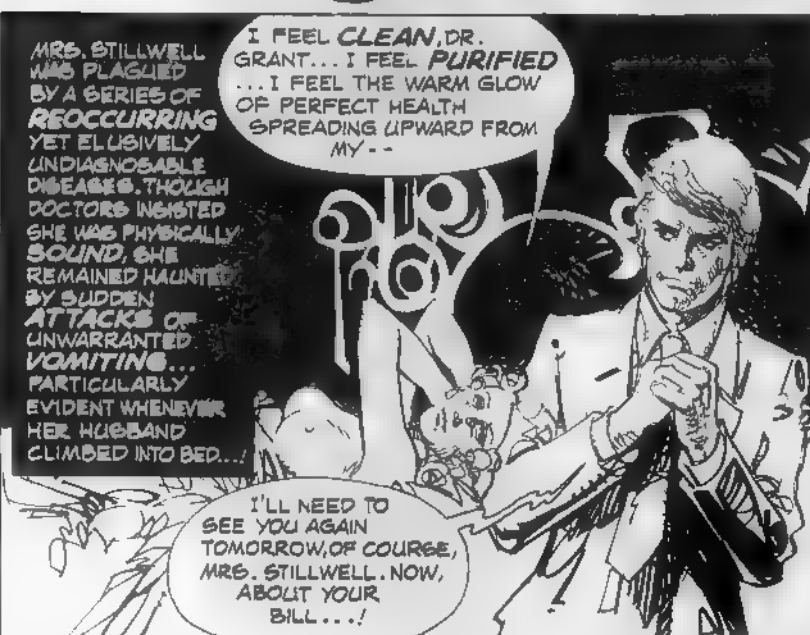
I WAS **WONDERING**, MARION... COULD YOU LEND ME A FEW **DOLLARS**...?



MRS. STILLWELL WAS **PLAGUED** BY A SERIES OF **REOCCURRING** YET ELUSIVELY **UNDIAGNOSABLE** DISEASES. THOUGH DOCTORS **INSISTED** SHE WAS **PHYSICALLY** SOUND, SHE REMAINED **HAUNTED** BY **SUDDEN** **ATTACKS** OF **UNWARRANTED** **VOMITING**... PARTICULARLY EVIDENT WHENEVER HER HUSBAND CLIMBED INTO BED...

I FEEL **CLEAN**, DR. GRANT... I FEEL **PURIFIED** ... I FEEL THE WARM GLOW OF PERFECT HEALTH SPREADING UPWARD FROM MY --

I'LL NEED TO SEE YOU AGAIN TOMORROW, OF COURSE, MRS. STILLWELL. NOW, ABOUT YOUR **BILL**...

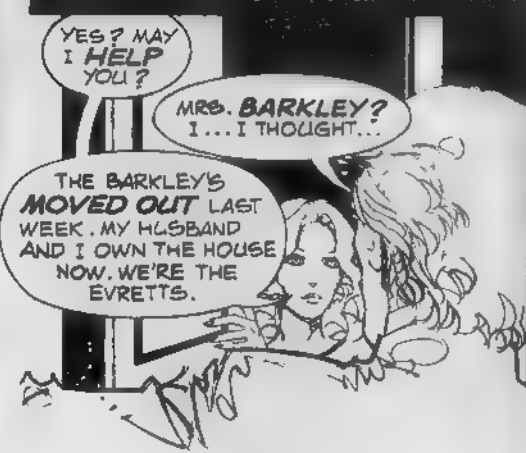


MRS. BARKLEY LOOKED **FAR OLDER** THAN HER FIFTY YEARS. MARRIED LIFE HAD WANED **SHARPLY** OVER THE DECADES, LEAVING ITS MARKS ETCHED WITH **EVER** **INCREASING** **REGULARITY** ON HER **HARRIED** FACE. SHE WAS **THIN**, **ANEMIC** -- EYES **SUNKEN** DEEPLY INTO HER...

YES? MAY I **HELP** YOU?

MRS. BARKLEY? I... I THOUGHT...

THE BARKLEY'S **MOVED OUT** LAST WEEK. MY HUSBAND AND I OWN THE HOUSE NOW. WE'RE THE **EVRETT**S.



... AND MAY I SAY
YOU LOOK **VERY MUCH**
LIKE MY LATE WIFE?

THAT'S VERY **FLATTERING**,
MR. GRANT, BUT I **STILL** DON'T
NEED ANY COSMETICS TODAY.
NOW, IF YOU'LL **EXCUSE** ME,
I HAVE SOME IRONING TO DO.

IT **HAPPENED** OCCASSIONALLY. EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD
HAD A **FEW** CUSTOMERS
WHO DIDN'T **SUCCUMB**,
THOUGH NOT MANY WITH MRS
EVRETT'S LOOKS. BUT HE
WAS **MORE** THAN SATIS-
FIED WITH THE DAY. HE WAS
WAY OVER QUOTA. THE
PROFESSIONAL MOVED UP
THE SIDEWALK TO HIS
HOUSE.

HE **LOCKED** THE FRONT
DOOR BEHIND HIM, THREW HIS
COAT ON A CHAIR, LOOSENED
HIS TIE AND WENT **DIRECTLY**
TO THE BASEMENT...

HE SWITCHED ON THE **RED** OVERHEAD
LIGHT IN THE SMALL paneled room and
SNAPPED OPEN THE BLACK VALISE. HE
REACHED INSIDE AND **UNHOOKED** THE
TINY COMPACT **CAMERA** FROM ITS
MOORINGS.

IN FIFTEEN MINUTES, ALL
THE **NEGATIVES**
WERE **DEVELOPED**.

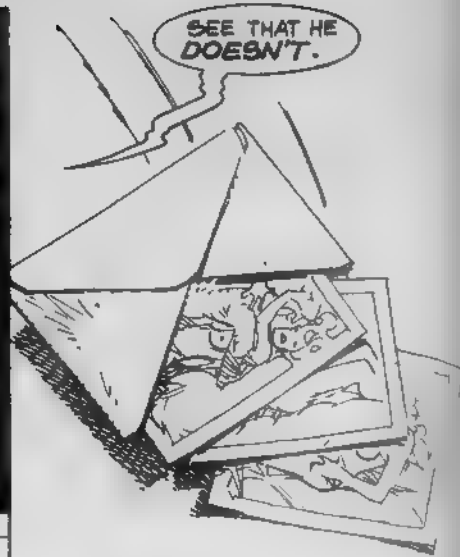
BY SIX O'CLOCK ALL THE
PRINTS WERE **DRIED**
AND PLACED IN **MANILA**
ENVELOPES.

BY SEVEN HE WAS **RELAXING**
WITH A MARTINI AND LISTENING TO
LINDA RONSTADT.



MRS. KETCHUM WAS THE FIRST TO BREAK...

I... I SIMPLY CAN'T AFFORD TO GIVE YOU ANY MORE, PETER. I HAVE ENJOYED OUR TIMES TOGETHER BUT... WELL, I THINK JOHN IS BEGINNING TO SUSPECT...!



SEE THAT HE DOESN'T.



YOU DISGUSTING, VILE, PERVERTED YOUNG --

I WANT ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS A DAY, VIVION...! YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO PILFER THAT FROM YOUR HUSBAND'S ACCOUNT WITHOUT HIM KNOWING IT.



MRS. FLETCHER WAS NEXT...

OH, MY GOD! WHAT AM I TO DO? WHAT AM I TO DO?

CUT DOWN ON CIGARETTES...!



I'M RUINED! RUINED! OH, WHAT BITTER FRUIT BEARS THE WEED OF UNCONSECATED LOVE! OH SWEET REVENGE, WHERE IS THY STING? OH --

GOOD DAY, MARION.



PETER? DOES THIS MEAN WE CAN'T... CAN'T...

OH, SURE WE CAN. BUT IT'LL COST YOU AN EXTRA HUNDRED NOW.



THINGS WENT SMOOTHLY. ROUTINE SET IN. BY MID-JULY HE'D BOUGHT A NEW CAMARO AND STARTED LOOKING AROUND FOR A MORE EXPENSIVE HOME. THERE WERE A FEW UNEVEN MOMENTS, OF COURSE, BUT THEY NEVER LASTED LONG...

YOU'RE LATE ON YOUR LAST PAYMENT SYLVIA.

PLEASE, PETER... CAN'T WE WORK SOMETHING OUT...?

IF YOU'RE LATE AGAIN, I'LL HAVE TO PENALIZE YOU. YOU WOULDN'T WANT THAT, WOULD YOU?

BY SEPTEMBER, HE'D GOTTEN RID OF THE CAMARO AND BOUGHT AN ALFA ROMEO. HE WAS STILL LOOKING FOR A NEW HOUSE BUT THAT WAS BECOMING LESS OF A PROBLEM; THE FLETCHER'S, IT SEEMED, HAD DECIDED ABRUPTLY TO MOVE TO FLORIDA.

HE'D PREDICTED IT. MRS. FLETCHER WAS NOT A STRONG WOMAN. WHEN YOU CAME RIGHT DOWN TO IT NO WOMAN WAS REALLY STRONG. WOMEN IN GENERAL WERE SHEEP...WEAK AS A BUNCH OF --



AH, MR. GRANT, I'M MRS. EVRETT...REMEMBER? AND YOU KNOW THESE LADIES.

WE'VE BEEN WAITING TO GIVE YOU SOMETHING.

A PRESENT FOR YOU, MR. GRANT, FROM THE WIVES OF SANTA MIRA. IT CONTAINS THE ASHES OF ALL THE PHOTOS YOU'VE TAKEN IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD AS WELL AS THEIR NEGATIVES. YOU REALLY SHOULD KEEP YOUR DARK ROOM LOCKED, YOU KNOW.



HOW DID YOU GET IN?

WE GOT IN. AND WE'RE ON TO YOU, MR. GRANT--ALL OF US. VIVION CONFIDED IN ME ONE DAY. IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO DISCOVER YOUR SORDID LITTLE GAME.

I THINK IT'S TIME YOU LEFT SANTA MIRA, MR. GRANT



I CAN STILL MAKE PHONE CALLS... STILL TELL YOUR HUSBANDS...



I'VE DONE SOME CHECKING ON YOU, MR. GRANT. YOU'VE COVERED YOUR TRACKS WELL... SO WELL THAT YOU'RE VIRTUALLY WITHOUT ANY MEANINGFUL IDENTIFICATION. EVEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DOESN'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE. I THINK IT'S TIME YOU LEFT SANTA MIRA, MR. GRANT...



...PERMANENTLY!





MRS. CORNWELL DELIVERED THE FIRST THRUST. IT WAS FROM THE BACK AND RATHER CLUMBILY EXECUTED...!



MRS. STILLWELL'S BLADE WAS CLEANER, YET FAR FROM FATAL...!



ALL IN ALL, IT TOOK NEARLY TEN MINUTES FOR HIM TO DIE... MOST OF THE WOMEN CONCENTRATED MORE ON THE GROIN AREA THAN ANY OF THE VITAL ORGANS...!



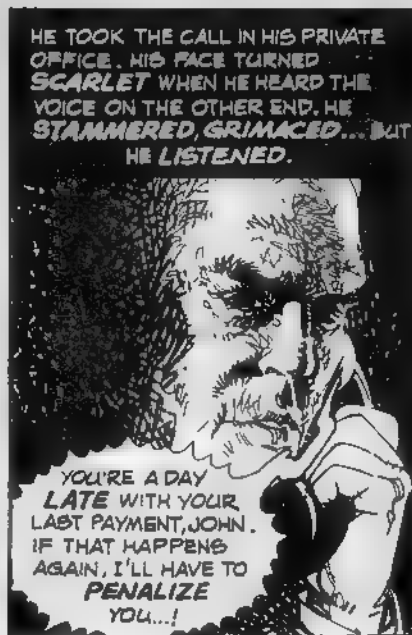
THIS FALLETH CAESAR! SO IT SHALL BE WITH ALL TYRANTS WHO--

C'MON, MARION! LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!



THAT AFTERNOON, MR. KETCHUM WAS INTERRUPTED AT AN IMPORTANT BUSINESS MEETING BY HIS SECRETARY. HE WAS **DISGRUNTLED**. HE DIDN'T LIKE BEING INTERRUPTED...!

THERE'S AN URGENT PHONE CALL FOR YOU, MR. KETCHUM!



HE TOOK THE CALL IN HIS PRIVATE OFFICE. HIS FACE TURNED **SCARLET** WHEN HE HEARD THE VOICE ON THE OTHER END. HE **STAMMERED, GRIMACED...** BUT HE LISTENED.

YOU'RE A DAY LATE WITH YOUR LAST PAYMENT, JOHN. IF THAT HAPPENS AGAIN, I'LL HAVE TO **PENALIZE** YOU...!



MRS. EVRETT HUNG UP. SHE PICKED UP HER MARTINI AND SAT BACK DOWN BESIDE THE STEREO. **ROUTINE** WAS SETTING IN AGAIN. THINGS WERE GOING **SMOOTHLY** ONCE MORE IN A MONTH SHE'D HAVE THAT NEW MINK STOLE SHE WANTED. BUSINESS WAS GOOD.

THE PROFESSIONAL SETTLED BACK IN HER EASY CHAIR AND **SMILED**.

THE LAST MAN SYNDROME

HE STOOD **ALONE** IN THE HEART OF THE CITY. A HEART THAT **SHOULD** HAVE THROBBED WITH THE PASSAGE OF **HUMANS** AND **MACHINES** ALONG THE **VEINS** AND **ARTERIES** OF THE SPRAWLING METROPOLIS.

BUT THERE WAS **NOTHING**. NO **SOUND**. NO **MOVEMENT**. NO **LIFE**.

THERE WAS **ONLY** HIM. AND THE EMPTY **SILENCE**. THE UNNATURAL, OPPRESSIVE SILENCE THAT HAD BEEN HIS **ONLY COMPANION** FOR... **HOW LONG** HAD IT BEEN MORE? HE COULD NOT **REMEMBER**. BUT THEN, THERE WAS **NOTHING** HE COULDN'T REMEMBER.

AND SO HE STOOD **ALONE**, **LOST**, AND **SCARED** AS **HELL**!

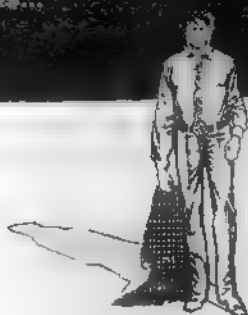
LIKE SPOTLESS, STERILE **TOMBSTONES**, BUILDINGS ROSE AROUND HIM, STRETCHING HIGH INTO A CLEAR BLUE SKY. FRIENDLESS, IMPERSONAL **MONUMENTS** OF **ANOTHER PLACE** AND **TIME**, CATCHING AND REFLECTING THE SUN'S HOT **SMOTHERING RAYS**...

... AND CARRYING HIS DESPERATE **SHOUT** FAR INTO TWISTING CANYONS OF CONCRETE, STEEL, AND GLASS WITHOUT **REPLY**.

MOCKING HIM WITH A THOUSAND REVERBERATING **ECHOS** OF HIS OWN FEAR CRACKED VOICE. BUT EVENTUALLY, EVEN THE **ECHOS** DIE...

... AND HE WAS **ALONE** IN THE **SILENCE** **ONCE MORE**.

AND SO HE **WALKED**. HIS SHOES
SCUFFED HOLLOWLY AGAINST
SMOLDERING ASPHALT AND HIS
BREATH WAS HARSH AND RAGGED
IN HIS EARS...



... AND WALKING, HE
REMEMBERED THAT ALL
HE COULD **REMEMBER**
WAS **WALKING**.

HE PAUSED, LOOKING AT THE UNFAMILIAR GUNBURNT
REFLECTION OF HIS FACE IN THE SHINING SURFACE
OF A STORE FRONT WINDOW.

WHO WAS HE? HE TRIED TO THINK, BUT HIS FACE
WAS THE UNRECOGNIZABLE FACE OF A STRANGER.
MOTHER IN HEAVEN... WHAT WAS **HAPPENING** TO HIM?



TIME, AND THE SEEMINGLY ENDLESS **CITY**, PASSED
SLOWLY, HE ACHED... HIS MIND A SWIRLING MAELSTROM
OF UNANSWERED, AND UNANSWERABLE, QUESTIONS.

A **Joke**. A GODDAMNED **COGNIC JOKE**. IT HAD TO
BE. AND HE WAS THE **FALL GUY**..



... AND STILL HE WAS **ALONE**...



... **EXCEPT**...



...FOR THE **TELEPHONE**...



GOD HOW HE **RAN**... RAN FOR ALL HE WAS WORTH. THE STIFFLING, SUN BAKED AIR BURNED A HOT PATH TO HIS LUNGS AND HIS SWEAT DRENCHED CLOTHING STUCK WETLY TO HIM LIKE A SECOND SKIN.

BUT HE RAN, AND IT SEEMS TO TAKE HIM HOURS TO CROSS THE STREET. HIS LEGS **TREMLED**...



...TREMLED ALMOST AS MUCH AS HIS **HAND** AS HE JERKED THE **RECEIVER** OFF THE HOOK AND PRESS IT TIGHTLY TO HIS EAR.



NOTHING.
DEAD, DEAD AS THE CITY, SILENT AS A CRYPT.
HE **MOGGED**, PLEADED, SOMEONE, ANYONE, PLEASE. HE SHOUTED ... **CURSED.**
AND THEN HE **SAW IT...**



...A WIND BLOWN **NEWSPAPER**. A CLUE, PERHAPS, TO **WHERE** HE WAS. TO WHAT HAD HAPPENED. AGAIN HE RAN, CHASING **ANSWERS**...

...CHASING THE WIND WITH GROWING **MADNESS** IN HIS RED-RIMMED EYES.

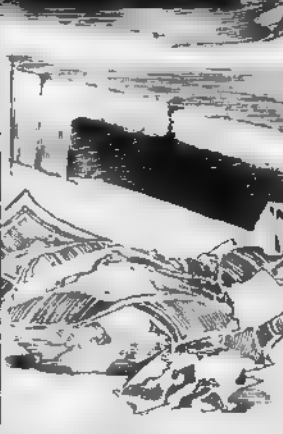


WEARY, HE STUMBLED, **FELL**. THE PAVEMENT RUSHED HARD AND FAST TO MEET HIM WITH BONE NUMBING **PAIN!**

BREATHLESS, HE TRIED TO **RISE**. **IMPOSSIBLE!**



AND THE **PAPER?**



GIBBERISH, THE WORDS... IF THEY WERE WORDS...
SWAM CRAZILY BEFORE HIS EYES. NO ANSWERS.
NO ANSWERS.



SO HE RETURNED THE NEWSPAPER...



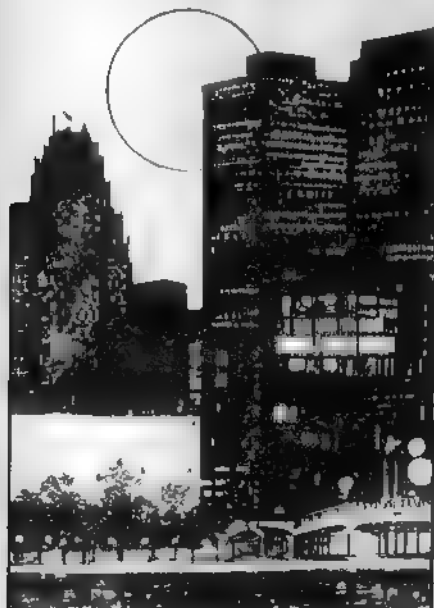
...TO THE UNCARING WIND...



...AND ONCE AGAIN
HE WAS ALONE.



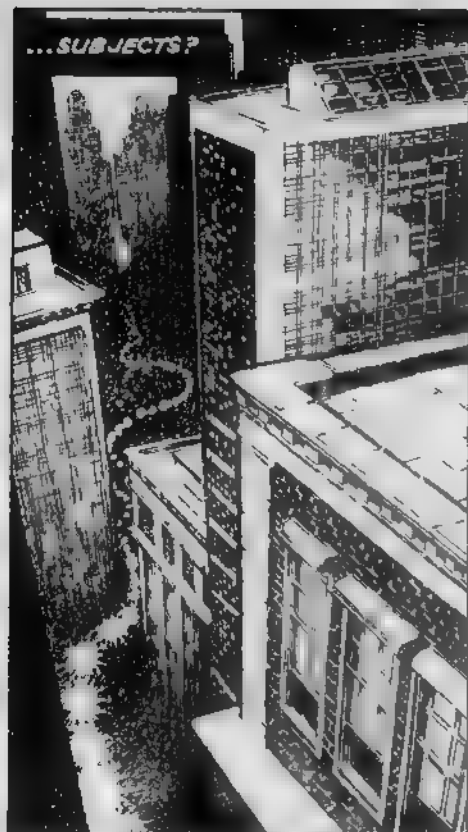
SHADOWS LENGTHENED, STALKED SILENTLY ACROSS A SILENT CITY. LIGHTS BLINKED ON IN THE EMPTY SKYSCRAPERS AND THE TENEMENTS AND THE TWO STORY BRICK HOMES IN THE SUBURBS IN A MACABRE RESEMBLANCE OF LIFE...



... BUT HE REMAINED A NAMELESS ENTITY IN A NAMELESS, GOD FORSAKEN WORLD REPRESENTING A MAJORITY OF ONE. THE KING OF THE WORLD.



... SUBJECTS?



HIS MOUTH WAS DRY AND HE COULD HEAR HIS HEART POUNDING IN HIS EARS. TORCH LIGHT. FOOTSTEPS. PEOPLE. COMING THIS WAY.

HE WANTED TO RUN... SHOUT TO THEM. EMBRACE THEM. TALK TO THEM. GOD, IT HAD BEEN SO LONG. BUT INSTEAD HE MERELY WATCHED...



... AS SHADOWY, DARK ROBED FIGURES PASSED HIM BY WITHOUT A WORD... WITHOUT A WHISPER.

A MIRAGE. A DREAM. LIKE THE TELEPHONE. AND THE NEWSPAPER. AND THE LIGHTS. HE WAS NUMB. BUT ANY COMPANY... EVEN IF ONLY IN HIS MIND... WAS BETTER THAN NONE. SO HE QUIETLY WATCHED THE PSYCHOPATHIC PARADE...



... AND THEIR UNWILLING CAPTIVE.

PLEASE! DON'T DO THIS... PLEASE!



THEY TIED HER ROUGHLY TO A CRUDE WOODEN STAKE... THAT WASN'T THERE A MINUTE AGO... IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET. HE ALMOST LAUGHED AT THE ABSURDITY OF THE SITUATION...

...AS THEY PILED MORE WOOD... DRY, BRITTLE KINDLING... HIGH AROUND HER LEGS. HE HEARD HER SOB HYSTERICALLY...

...AND THEN SHE SPOKE...

JASON!
HELP ME--!

... HIS NAME?

NO!
DON'T!

HIS NAME! SHE MUST KNOW HIM! AND EVEN AS TORCH IGNITED WOOD HE WAS RUNNING TOWARD HER, BRANDISHING... HIS SWORD?

WHEN THE ROBED FIGURES TURNED PONDEROUSLY TO BLOCK HIS PATH...

WHERE
THE HELL DID--?
IT DOESN'T
MATTER.

STOP!

CHOK

THOK

HAHAHAHAHAHA!

HE SHUDDERED, SUDDENLY SICK,
AND LEFT QUICKLY **PAST** THE
ROBED HORRORS.

FLAMES LICKED AT HIS
CLOTHING. HE HEARD HIS HAIR
SINGE, CRACKLING LIKE THE
DEAD WHITE BONES OF THE
SKELETON-GHOULS BEHIND
HIM.



JASON. SHE CALLED HIM JASON, AND HE
HAD TO KNOW WHY. SO MANY **QUESTIONS**
TO ASK...



...BUT FIRST...



...**ESCAPE**! IF HE COULD ESCAPE THIS **MADNESS**...

HER **HAND** WAS SOFT IN HIS AND HER BREATH WAS
WARM AND COMFORTING ON THE BACK OF HIS NECK...



...AND SHE **CHANGED** SO SLOWLY, SO IMPERCEPTIVELY, THAT HE
DIDN'T NOTICE UNTIL IT WAS **TOO LATE**, UNTIL HER SOFT, SOFT
HAND WAS HARD AND COLD IN HIS...



...UNTIL HER BREATH WHISTLED SUDDENLY
ICY DOWN HIS BACK...

...HIS **UNPROTECTED** BACK.



IT REACHED OUT WITH BONEY, TALON-LIKE HANDS. HE GASPED, CHOKING...



...AND THE **LAST** THING HE SAW BEFORE HIS ACHING LUNGS BURST WITHIN HIS CHEST WAS THE CALLOUS FACE OF... **DEATH.**

THE NIGHT BECAME BLACKER AND HE WAS FALLING...

...FALLING...



...A VICTIM OF THE PRESSURE, PERHAPS. OR MAYBE OF THE TIMES. CERTAINLY OF THE CONDITION. THE HUMAN CONDITION.

PSYCHOLOGISTS HAD EVEN GIVEN IT A NAME.

THE LAST MAN SYNDROME.

IT WASN'T A COMMON DISORDER...



...OF MINDS LIKE HIS THAT COULD NO LONGER STAND THE STRESSES OF A WORLD GROWN MUCH TOO COLD... TOO HOSTILE...

...CHOKED!



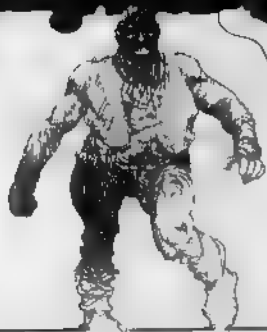
WELL, HE HAD HIS **PRIVACY** NOW. HE DIDN'T EVEN **FEEL** THE MILLIONS OF PASSING FEET THAT RELENTLESSLY TRAMPLED HIS LIFELESS BODY. HE COULDN'T HEAR THE NUMBLING, ANGRY VOICES CURSING HIM BECAUSE HE HAD GOTTEN IN THE **WAY.**

STANKING WISHED ON. HE **MISSED...**



PROLOGUE

JACKIE PAPER WAS AN **ADVENTURER**, A **SWORDSMAN**, AN **ATONER**, A **PRINCE** AND A **HERO**. HIS FATHER WAS KING, WEALTHY BEYOND MEASURE. HIS TUTOR WAS THE BRAVEST KNIGHTS IN HIS FATHER'S COURT. HIS FRIENDS WERE THE CHILDREN OF NOBLE MEN AND GENTLE WOMEN.



JACKIE PAPER WAS NO DIFFERENT FROM ANY CHILD SEEKING THE WARMING COMFORTS OF **FANTASY** TO ESCAPE THE COLD INDIFFERENCE OF **REALITY**. HE WAS A **DREAMER**.



JACKIE **NEEDED** HIS DREAMS. THEY WERE HIS WHITE STALLION, HIS ESCAPE FROM **POVERTY**, **HUNGER**, AND HIS FATHER'S **HARD BOOT**.



JACKIE **KNEW** THERE WAS LITTLE **DIFFERENCE** BETWEEN HIS FATHER AND HIM. WHERE JACKIE FLED INTO MIND-NUMBING **FANTASY**, HIS FATHER HID FROM THE WORLD WITHIN A STUPEFYING FLASK OF **CHEAP GAG**.



JACKIE REALIZED THAT SOMEDAY, HE TOO WOULD HAVE TO DON THAT CYNICALLY HARSH MANTLE OF **MANHOOD**. HIS DREAMS WOULD DRIFT INTO THE NOTHINGNESS FROM WHENCE THEY CAME...AND HIS LIFE WOULD FOLLOW THE SAME PATH OF **DRUDGERY** HIS FATHER'S HAD TAKEN.

AND HE, TOO, WOULD TURN TO DROWNING HIS TROUBLES IN AN **ALCOHOLIC STUPOR**.



YET, JACKIE UNDERSTOOD THAT HIS LIFE WAS HIS **OWN**. OVER YONDER HILL AWAITED HIS KINGDOM, HIS PRINCESS, HIS LIFE AS AN **ADVENTURER** AND A **HERO**. WHILE **ABOVE**... WITH HIS FATHER... HE HAD ONLY A LIFE OF **MISERY** AND **HARDSHIP** LEERING AT HIM.



BLURRR...RD!

JACKIE AND THE LEPRECHAUN KING

JACKIE HAD LIVED THROUGH **EIGHT** HOT, DEAD, HUNGRY SUMMERS WHEN HE DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO STRIKE OUT AND SEEK HIS FORTUNE.



HE HAD NO IDEA WHAT AWAITED HIM OVER THE NEXT HILL. HE KNEW ONLY THAT **WHATEVER** LURKED THERE, HE WOULD GREET IT WITH WELCOMING ARMS AND A HEARTY SMILE. FOR JACKIE KNEW... EVEN IF **DEATH** AWAITED HIM, IT WOULD BE A MORE PLEASANT FATE THAN THAT WHICH HE HAD LEFT **BEHIND**.



JACKIE FOUND HIS FATE... AND **ADVENTURE** ON THE VERY FIRST DAY OF HIS NEW LIFE.



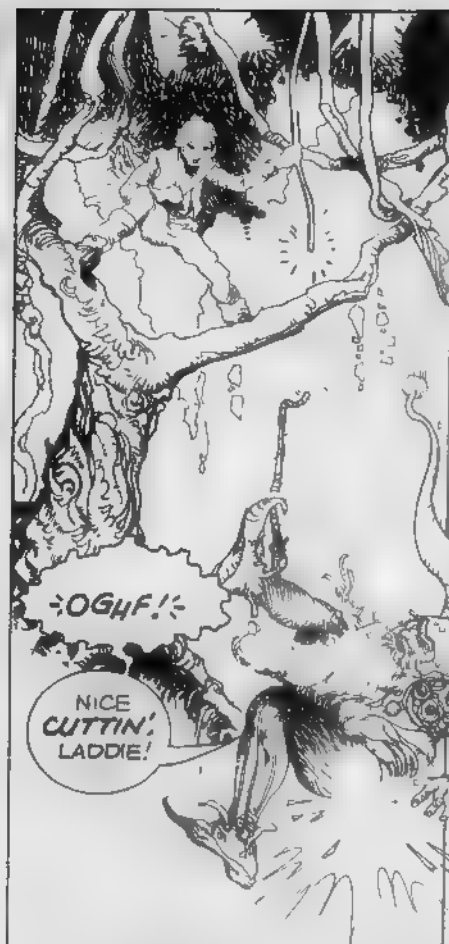


WELL? ARE YE GOIN' TO STAND THERE ALL DAY A'GAWKIN' AT A POOR MAN'S MISFORTUNE...

...OR WILL YA BE HELPIN' ME DOWN, LADDY?



THAT'S WHAT I LIKE TO SEE. A MAN OF FEW WORDS AND QUICK ACTION.



OGHF!

NICE CUTTIN' LADDIE!



ME NAME'S **BUBBA O'REILLY**...OF THE HARD DRINKIN', FAST LOVIN', FEISTY O'REILLY'S. AND I'M IN YOUR DEBT, BOY.

YOU HAVE A NAME, BOY?



I'M **JACKIE PAPER**, ...OF THE FAST DRINKIN', HARD LOVIN' PAPERS.

AYE! AND I'LL BET YOU'D BE COMIN' FROM THE VILLAGE BELOW!

OH, NO! I'M A PRINCE AND AN ADVENTURER. I... I LIVE HERE... IN THE FOREST NOW!



A PRINCE OF THE FOREST? MY... YOU ARE A REGAL ONE!

WELL, PRINCELY JACKIE PAPER, HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE JOININ' ME IN A SPOT OF BREAKFAST?

IT'S THE LEAST I CAN OFFER YOU IN EXCHANGE FOR MY LIFE.



THAT SOUNDS GOOD, BUT TELL ME... HOW IS IT YOU CAME TO BE DANGLING FROM A ROPE OUT HERE IN THE FOREST?

PIRATES, ME BOY!

THEY'VE GOT TRAPS ALL OVER THE FOREST... JUST WAITING TO SPRING ON UNSUSPECTING FOLK LIKE YOU'N ME!

PIRATES!? I... I DIDN'T KNOW THERE WERE ANY PIRATES AROUND HERE!

THE WOODS ARE CRAWLIN' WITH 'EM, JACKIE BOY. THEY COME HERE TO BURY THEIR TREASURES... THEN THEY PLANT TRAPS TO KEEP THE FOREST FOLK AWAY.

THEMS THAT THEY CATCH IN THEIR SNARES, THEY ROAST ALIVE AND EAT FOR MIDDAY SNACKS.

GOSH!

WERE YOU LOOKING FOR PIRATE TREASURE WHEN THEY CAUGHT YOU, BUBBA?

TREASURE? HA! I'VE GOT ALL THE TREASURE I NEED! WHY, YOU JUST FOLLOW BUBBA AND I'LL SHOW YOU A TREASURE FIT FOR A PRINCE, PRINCE JACKIE!

G-GOLLY! W-WHAT IS THIS PLACE?

WE CALL IT HARMONY... HOME OF THE LEPRECHAUNS!

AND THIS IS FLUFF... GUARDIAN OF THE ROYAL GATEWAY!

YEEEEOW!

YOU'VE NOTHIN' TO FEAR FROM FLUFF, LADDY.

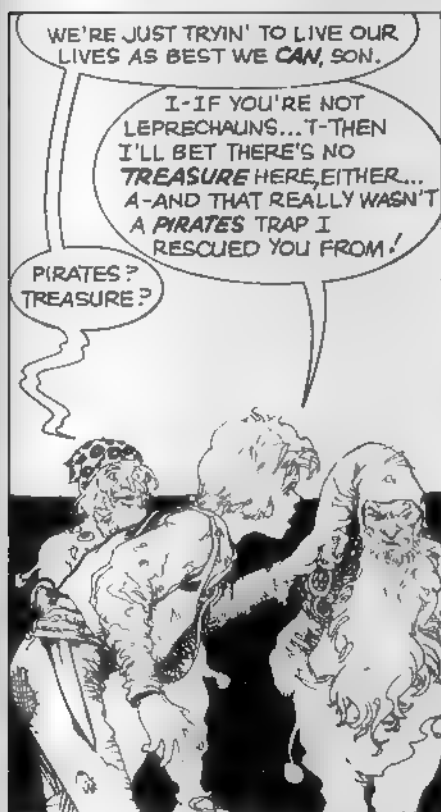
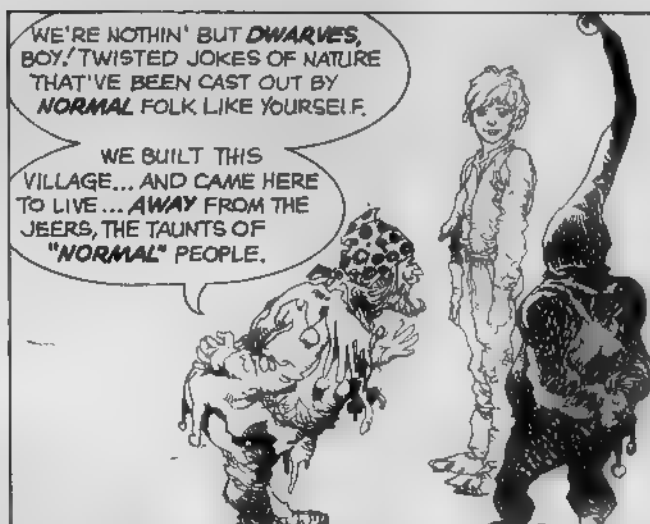
HE'S BIG, STRONG AN' FEROCIOUS TOWARDS PIRATES... BUT AS GENTLE AS A PUPPYCUB WITH YOU N ME.

HE AIN'T REAL UNLESSIN' I WISH HIM TO BE.

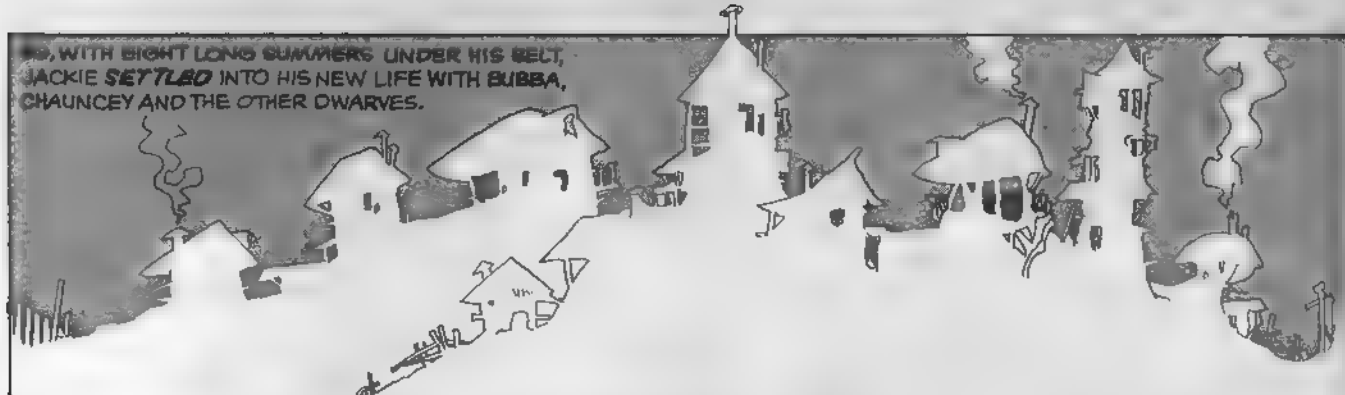
T-THEN YOU'RE A LEPRECHAUN, MR. O'REILLY?

ME BOY LIKE YOURSELF, I AM ROYALTY. I AM KING OF THE LEPRECHAUNS!

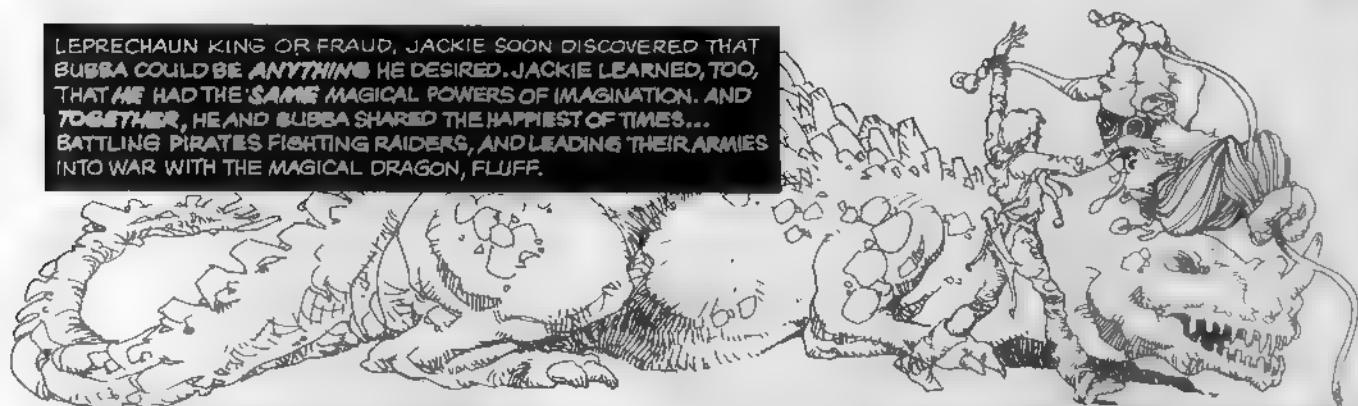
NOT ONLY THAT, BUT HE'S THE BIGGEST DAMNED LIAR THIS SIDE O' DUBLIN!



...WITH EIGHT LONG SUMMERS UNDER HIS BELT, JACKIE **SETTLED** INTO HIS NEW LIFE WITH BUBBA, CHAUNCEY AND THE OTHER DWARVES.



LEPRECHAUN KING OR FRAUD, JACKIE SOON DISCOVERED THAT BUBBA COULD BE **ANYTHING** HE DESIRED. JACKIE LEARNED, TOO, THAT HE HAD THE **SAME** MAGICAL POWERS OF IMAGINATION. AND **TOGETHER**, HE AND BUBBA SHARED THE HAPPIEST OF TIMES... **BATTLING** PIRATES FIGHTING RAIDERS, AND LEADING THEIR ARMIES INTO WAR WITH THE MAGICAL DRAGON, FLUFF.



WHILE BACK IN THE VILLAGE, JACKIE'S FATHER GREW OLDER UNDER THE STRAIN OF DREARY DAILY TOIL... COUPLED WITH THE WORRY OVER HIS LOST, **LOVED** SON.

IT'S BEEN **WEEKS**, ROBBY! WHERE COULD HE **BE**? WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED TO MY **BOY**?



H-HE'S ALL I HAVE! S-SINCE HIS MOTHER DIED... IT AIN'T BEEN **EASY** FOR US, AND NOW...

...NOW...

WHO COULD HAVE **STOLEN** HIM FROM ME?



THERE'S **NOWHERE** HE COULD HAVE **GONE**, DARBY. THERE AIN'T A **VILLAGE** WITHIN A HUNDRED MILES OF HERE.

DON'T BE SO **SURE** OF THAT, ROBBIE BOY!



I'VE HEARD HUNTERS TALK OF AN **UNHOLY** **VILLAGE** NESTLED AWAY IN THE MOUNTAINS YONDER.

THERE'S RUMORS IT'S A VILLAGE OF THE **DAMNED**. INHABITED BY **DEVILS**. NIGHTSTALKING **CREATURES**!



IF YOUR JACKIE'S NOWHERE TO BE FOUND IN **THIS** VILLAGE, DARBY, IT'S A GOOD BET HE'S IN THE **STENPOT** OF THOSE OGRES.

NOOO!
WE'VE GOT TO SAVE HIM! YOU'VE GOT TO HELP ME GET HIM OUT OF THERE!



CALM YOURSELF, DARBY! WE DON'T KNOW FOR SURE JACKIE'S IN THE HANDS OF **DEVILS**. WE DON'T EVEN KNOW IF THERE **ARE** ANY DEVILS... LET ALONE A **VILLAGE** OF THEM.

I FOR ONE, AM GOING TO **FIND OUT!** AND IF THERE'S A **MAN** AMONG YOU, HE'LL BE COMING **WITH ME!**



JACKIE'S LIFE IN **HARMONY** WAS A GOOD ONE. SOMETIMES, HE WOULD HELP THE DWARVES IN THEIR FIELDS. YET, WHEN THE SUN WAS ITS BRIGHTEST, HE AND BUBBA COULD BE FOUND IN THE FORESTS... RISKING THEIR LIVES IN SEARCH OF **PIRATES' TREASURE.**



IT WAS ON JUST SUCH ONE OF THESE EXCURSIONS THAT BUBBA STUMBLED UPON THE BLOODTHIRSTY BAND OF CUTTHROAT **PIRATES!**



DOWN, BOY! IT'S **BLACKBEARD** HIMSELF... COME TO **STEAL** THE LEGENDARY **LEPRECHAUN** TREASURE!





WE'VE GOT TO
WARN THE OTHERS.
BUBBA!

NO, BOY! IF THEY
SEE US, THEY'LL FOLLOW
US BACK TO HARMONY...
AND THERE'LL BE A
SLAUGHTER!



ONLY WAY TO SAVE
HARMONY IS A
DIVERSION.

I'LL LEAD THEM
A MERRY CHASE, ME BOY.
YOU WARN THE
OTHERS!



BUBBA! NO
T-HEY'LL KILL
YOU!

RUN, BOY! SAVE
YOURSELF! KING
BUBBA CAN TAKE
CARE O'HISSELF!



IT'S ONE'A
THE DEMON
PEOPLE!

KETCH
'IM!

KILL
HIM!

HE'LL LEAD
US TO THE
OTHERS



GRAB THE
BEGGAR!

SLIT
'IM!

GUT THE
DEVIL!

JACKIE HAD NO CHOICE. HE COULDN'T
HELP HIS TINY FRIEND NOW. ALL
HE COULD DO WAS AWAY... WARN THE
DWARVES... AND HOPE THEY WOULD
BELIEVE!



CHAUNCEY!
CHAUNCEY!
H-HELP HIM!
T-HEY'VE GOT
BUBBA!

JACKIE! SLOW DOWN,
ME BOYO... THE DEVIL'S
NOT BREATHIN' DOWN
YER NECK!



ARROWS SLICED THE AIR WITH THEIR DEADLY SHRIE!
BLADES CUT THE SHRILL SCREAMING GLENCE IN
MOANS OF DEATH. AND THE BLOOD OF THE HARMLESS
PEACELOVING "DEMONS" PAINTED THE EARTH
CRIMSON... THE EARTH THEY HAD LOVED... RESPECTED
... AND CAME TO CALL THEIR OWN.



AND THROUGH IT ALL, TWO SILENT, TEAR-FILLED EYES
COULD ONLY WATCH THE HORROR... AND WHEN... AND
HOPE FOR THE MIRACLE THAT WAS SO DESPERATELY
NEEDED.



A MIRACLE OF SURVIVAL!



A MIRACLE OF LIFE.

A-A DRAGON!

LORD! SAVE US
FROM THE DEVILS
MAGICKS!



KILL THEM, FLUFF! DESTROY
THE CUTTHROAT PIRATES!

ROWWWWRR!



BUT EVEN *MIRACLES* CAN BE HALTED...
DESTROYED BY SOMETHING FAR MORE
TANGIBLE... *REALITY!*



D-DADDY... DADDY...
YOU KILLED THEM! YOU
MURDERED KING
BUBBA. YOU KILLED
FLUFF... THE
OTHERS!

JACKIE! SON!
WE DID IT FOR
YOU!

WE'VE RESCUED
YOU FROM THE DEVILS...
SAVED YOU!

THEY HAD YOU UNDER
THEIR *SPELL*, SON! THEY
HAD YOU THINKING THEY
WERE *GOOD*... AND WE
WERE THE *EVIL* ONES!

DON'T
YOU SEE?



NOOO! YOU CAN'T
KILL HIM! YOU CAN'T
KILL FLUFF!

HE WON'T
DIE! H-HE
WON'T!

SON!

JACKIE!



YOU'VE GOT TO
UNDERSTAND THAT, SON!
WE'VE SAVED YOU FROM
THE *DEMON MONSTERS!*



S-SAVED ME...?

SON!

SON EVERYTHING
WILL BE ALL RIGHT
FROM NOW ON!

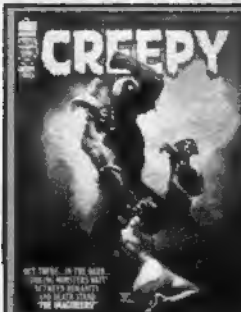
THERE WAS A TIME... WHEN **DREAMS**
WERE ALL HE HAD. THERE WAS A TIME
WHEN JACKIE PAPER WAS A
DREAMER. AND THE WORLD WAS
FILLED WITH SUNSHINE, LOVE AND
THE WONDEROUS SMELL OF BLOSSOMS.

BUT THE DAY JACKIE BECAME A **MAN**
THE WORLD OF IMAGINATION AND
ADVENTURE WAS **LOST** TO HIM FOREVER



AND IT WAS A PITY, FOR EVEN IN
IMAGINATION, THERE WERE
BEAUTIFUL **REALITIES**.

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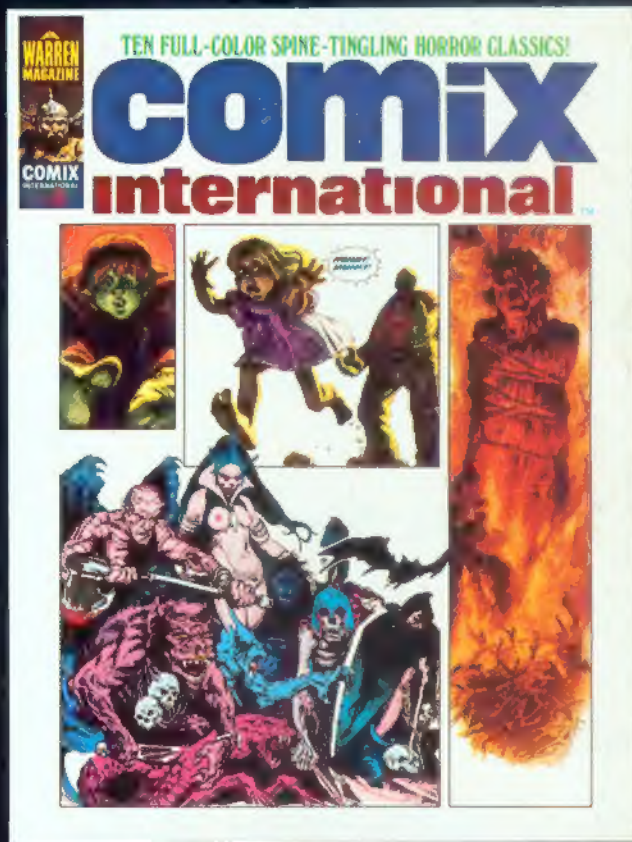
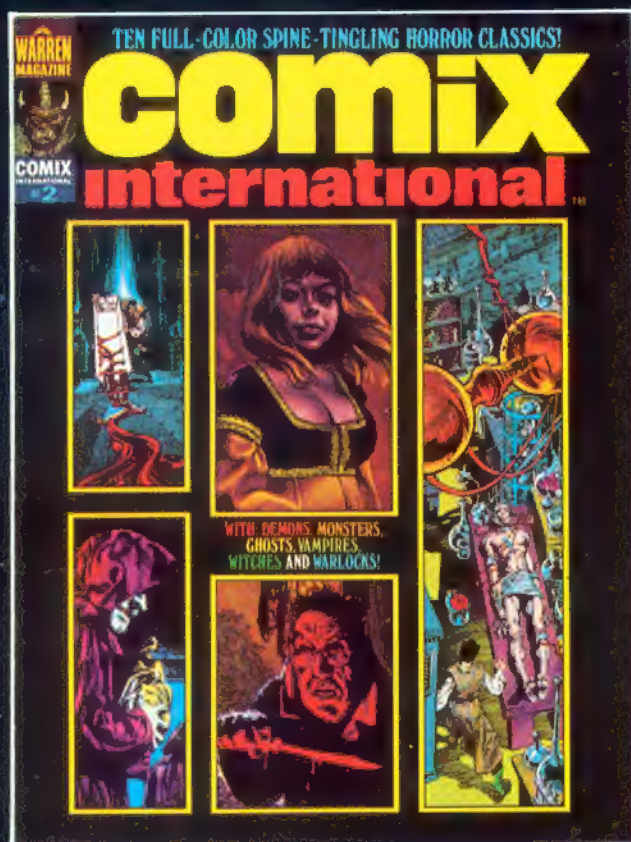
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